

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5817
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
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SUBJECT: SNP THUMPED IN SCOTTISH REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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SUMMARY: THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP), WHICH HAD LAUNCHED ITS LARGEST EVER CAMPAIGN AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL, WAS BADLY DEFEATED IN THE MAY 2 ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND. LABOR HAD EXPECTED TO LOSE A NUMBER OF SEATS, BUT REGISTERED HANDSOME GAINS, AS DID THE TORIES. BOTH INCREASED THEIR SHARE OF THE TOTAL VOTE. THIS OUTCOME CONFIRMS TRENDS NOTED IN THE RECENT GLASGOW GARSCADDEN BY-ELECTION AND OPINION POLLS, THOUGH IT WOULD BE PREMATURE TO CONCLUDE THE SNP IS A WANING FORCE IN SCOTLAND. IT NOW SEEMS PROBABLE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL MOVE TO HOLD THE HAMILTON BY-ELECTION, AND LABOR STANDS A GOOD CHANCE OF RETAINING THAT SEAT. END SUMMARY.

1. THE RESULTS OF THE MAY 2 REGIONAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND REPRESENTED A SHARP REVERSE FOR THE SEPAR-
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ATIST SNP. OPTIMISTIC ABOUT ITS PROSPECTS, THE SNP HAD MOUNTED ITS LARGEST EVER ASSAULT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT, FIELDING OVER 200 CANDIDATES. BASED ON ALMOST COMPLETE RETURNS, THE SNP LOST 16 SEATS, WHILE GAINING ONLY 7, A NET LOSS OF 9 SEATS. DESPITE RUNNING MANY MORE CANDIDATES THAN EVER BEFORE, THE SNP'S SHARE OF THE TOTAL VOTE INCREASED ONLY marginally, FROM 21.9

PERCENT IN 1974 TO 22.3 PERCENT. THE VOTES CAST FOR THE SNP PER SEAT WON DECLINED FROM 2,605 TO 1,874, A DROP OF 32 PERCENT. BUT MOST WORRYING FOR THE SNP WERE: ITS POOR SHOWING IN THE HAMILTON CONSTITUENCY, WHERE SNP VICE CHAIRMAN MARGO MCDONALD HOPES TO WIN THE VACANT LABOR SEAT IN A BY-ELECTION (LABOR WON ALL THREE LOCAL COUNCIL SEATS); AND ITS SAGGING FORTUNES IN FIVE SCOTTISH "NEW TOWNS" WHICH WERE CONSIDERED BASTIONS OF SNP STRENGTH (VOTERS RETURNED TO LABOR IN DROVES). THE MEDIA HAVE CHARACTERIZED THE RESULTS AS A "SEVERE DEFEAT" AND A "MASSACRE" FOR THE SNP.

2. THE LABOR PARTY, WHICH STARTED FROM THE HIGHEST BASE BECAUSE OF ITS STRONG PERFORMANCE IN THE MAY 1974 REGIONAL ELECTIONS, WAS GENERALLY JUDGED TO BE THE MAJOR VICTOR -- LABOR HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO LOSE A NUMBER OF SEATS (OUR SOURCES HAD PLACED PROBABLE LOSSES BETWEEN 20 AND 30 SEATS, NET). IN THE EVENT, LABOR PICKED UP 16, WHILE LOSING ONLY 5, FOR A NET GAIN OF 11. IT EASILY RETAINED CONTROL OF THE GIANT STRATHC/YDE REGION, AND GAINED CONTROL OF LOUTHIAN AND CENTRAL REGIONS. ITS SHARE OF THE TOTAL VOTE WAS UP SLIGHTLY OVER 1974, FROM 42.5 TO 43.4 PERCENT.

3. THE TORIES RETAINED SECOND PLACE WITH 29.7 PERCENT OF THE VOTE (28.4 IN 1974), ACTUALLY PICKING UP MORE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SEATS THAN LABOR, A NET 16, BUT MOST OF THEIR GAINS CAME AT THE EXPENSE OF VARIOUS INDEPENDENT OR LOCAL GROUPS, WHICH LOST A NET 16 SEATS. THE CONSERVATIVES GAINED CONTROL OF THE TAYSIDE REGION. THE LIBERALS LOST TWO SEATS, NET.

4. REACTIONS OF THE INTERESTED PARTIES WERE PREDICTABLE. SCOTTISH SECRETARY BRUCE MILLAN, SPEAKING FOR LABOR, CLAIMED THE ELECTORATE HAD FIRMLY REJECTED SEPARATISM, WHILE THE TORY VICE CHAIRMAN FOR SCOTLAND SAID THE OUTCOME SHOWED SCOTLAND HAD RETURNED TO TRADITIONAL, TWO-PARTY POLITICS. SNP SPOKESMEN WERE CLEARLY DIS-APPOINTED, ATTRIBUTING THE SETBACK TO THEIR DECLARED POLICY OF PHASING OUT THE REGIONAL LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT ONCE THEY GAINED A MAJORITY IN THE SCOTTISH ASSEMBLY. PRIVATELY, HOWEVER, WE UNDERSTAND SNP LEADERS BELIEVE THEY MADE A SERIOUS MISJUDGEMENT IN MOUNTING AN ALL-OUT CAMPAIGN FOR CONTROL OF REGIONAL GOVERNMENT.

5. COMMENT: WHILE WE WOULD NOT QUARREL WITH THE JUDGEMENTS EXPRESSED BY LABOR AND CONSERVATIVE SPOKESMEN, WE ARE NOT PREPARED TO CONSIDER THE SNP A DECLINING

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FORCE IN SCOTLAND -- WHILE SUPPORT FOR THAT PARTY
HAS CLEARLY DECLINED, PARTICULARLY SINCE LAST OCTOBER,
THE SCOTTISH ELECTORATE HAS BEEN HIGHLY VOLATILE IN
RECENT YEARS. THE OUTCOME' HOWEVER, UNDERSCORES THE
VALIDITY OF TRENDS NOTED IN THE GARSCADDEN BY-ELECTION
AND RECENT OPINION POLLS (REFTELS). IT NOW SEEMS
PROBABLE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL MOVE TO SCHEDULE THE
DELAYED HAMILTON BY-ELECTION AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE,
TRYING TO CAPTURE LABOR SUPPORT AT ITS FLOOD. AND IT
SHOULD HOLD THE SEAT.

6. THE DISQUIETING ASPECT OF THESE ELECTION RESULTS
IS HOW THEY MAY AFFECT THE SNP AND THE GOVERNMENT'S
POSITION IN PARLIAMENT. THE HARDLINE SEPARATISTS IN
THE SNP. WHO HAVE BEEN IN THE MINORITY, ARE ALREADY
ARGUING THAT BY SUPPORTING DEVOLUTION THE SNP HAS
BEEN PLAYING THE GOVERNMENT'S GAME AND DEMANDING
ADOPTION OF A MORE MILITANT PRO-INDEPENDENCE POSTURE.
SUCH A CHANGE IN DIRECTION, IN OUR JUDGEMENT, WOULD
CAUSE FURTHER EROSION IN SNP SUPPORT, BUT IN THE SHORT-
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TERM COULD IMPACT ON CALLAGHAN'S POSITION IN PARLIAMENT.
IF THE "REJECTIONISTS" SHOULD GAIN THE UPPER HAND IN
THE SNP'S PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION, THEY MIGHT TAKE
A MORE AGGRESSIVE ANTI-GOVERNMENT STAND. WE ARE
INCLINED TO BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT HUMAN NATURE WILL
PREVAIL AMONG THE SNP'S MPS -- READING THE ELECTION
RESULTS AND POLLS, THEY WILL PROBABLY WISH TO AVOID
PRECIPITATING A GENERAL ELECTION IN THE NEAR-TERM.

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